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Persistence Factors for Adult Women Learners at a Northeast Community College

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Abstract

Community colleges have been the long-standing institution type for students seeking a post-secondary education because of their relatively low cost and open access philosophies. Particularly, adult or non-traditional women learners have chosen the community college route over the past few decades (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Motivations to enroll, persist and graduate, vary, depending on factors internal and external to the college and are often dissimilar to their traditional aged counterparts. Given this difference and increasing enrollment numbers, understanding the lived experiences of adult women learners is critical for individual institutions and the larger higher education community. This exploratory study sought to understand how adult women learners at a community college perceived their persistence, the role of the institution, and thoughts on career-related services. It also sought their suggested improvements to the community college environment in order to meet their needs. Eleven students participated in the interviews to gather data. Participants described a lack of communication between campus offices, misinformation from academic advising services and creating a family-student and often work balance as barriers to their persistence. In contrast, support from faculty, family, friends and classmates were integral to persistence through their degree programs. Personal motivation and dedication were also highly important to their college perseverance. In relation to career services, almost all of the participants had not used the support and found little relevance to their experiences. Overall, the women in this study demonstrated a love of learning, dedication to their goals, growth in personal confidence and a deep interest in inspiring others. Recommendations include creating space within the community college website, physical space, orientation and culture for adult learners. Additional recommendations are the creation of an affinity group, initiatives to increase cross-campus communication and strengthening academic advising.
Introduction

Non-traditional or adult students, often described as those 25 years or older, have been an increasing population within higher education institutions in recent decades and within this population, the number of women has increased faster than that of men. A variety of factors, including personal, economic, and cultural, contributes to enrollment, but very few empirical studies have addressed persistence and retention factors among women (Cox & Ebbers, 2010). This is particularly true for the community colleges, which enroll almost half of the total undergraduate students nationwide. Within this group, adults aged 22 and older comprise 60% of the national community college population and women comprise 57% of the total population regardless of age (2013 Community College Fast Facts, 2013). Often adult students regard community colleges as easily accessible and flexible to their needs (Boggs, 2004). Additionally, experts project that the rate of students entering higher education institutions directly after high school will flatten or decrease over the next decade, while the domestic job market will grow only for individuals with a post-secondary degree. Due to this trend, institutions operating from a traditional student service focus and academic model will likely prove less sustainable (Kelly & Strawn, 2011, Hadfield, 2003). Given the continuous increase in enrollment and higher rates of dropout or stop-out than traditional students, knowledge of persistence factors of adult learners and specifically women at community colleges is invaluable to higher education professionals.

To begin, I will review the relevant discourses on this subject for historical and current contextual influences. I will then elaborate on the qualitative study of adult women learners at a northeast community college I conducted to comprehensively understanding the barriers women face, the factors that contribute to their retention or persistence and to a lesser degree, the role institutional career-focused services played in their experience. Through the information gleaned
from personal interviews, I will contribute to the limited body of knowledge on this population and present findings that will inform decision-making processes concerned with increasing retention rates. For this study, I concur with Cohen and Brawer’s (2008) definition of “the community college as any institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree” (p. 5). Another important clarifying term is non-traditional or adult learner. I focused my data collection study on moderately to highly non-traditional students as described by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Choy’s (2002) work for NCES listed characteristics of non-traditional students and depending on the amount an individual exhibited, determined their moderate or high status. The characteristics are, delayed enrollment after finishing high school, part-time attendance at a post-secondary institution, concurrently working full time, financially independent according to financial aid standards, a single parent, and/or has a GED or incomplete high school diploma. Having more than one of the above characteristics qualifies an individual for the moderately non-traditional moniker, and ‘highly non-traditional’ when reporting four or more characteristics.

Although age is often the defining characteristic that labels students as adult or non-traditional, the incorporation of the NCES characteristics provides a more complex and realistic portrait of those enrolled in community colleges. The research participants had a combination of NCES characteristics and were older than 25, and through interviews I explored questions of persistence and institutional support. With this method, the qualitative data collected focused on a vulnerable population that experiences greater risks of failing to persist and the findings will hopefully have influence on fulfilling the community college promise of supporting community members in their higher education aspirations (Thelin, 2011).
Community Colleges: A Brief History

Higher Education in the United States consists of a variety of institutions offering post-secondary education. Within this network, the community college has contributed significantly to the landscape of higher education principles. Two purposes of community colleges dominated practices throughout much of the 20th and 21st centuries. The initial purpose began in the first decades of the 20th century with institutions, termed junior colleges, providing the first two years of post-secondary liberal arts education, with the typical student intending to transfer to a baccalaureate program. With the post-WWII surge in enrollment, largely attributed to the G.I. Bill of 1944, junior colleges not only grew in number, but also experienced a shift toward technical skills degrees that students applied to local industries. This change favored a new name, community college, and represented the second purpose, vocational training (Thelin, 2011). Several scholars (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Levin, 2005) describe a third purpose as developmental or remedial education. With duality of mission and public funding, community colleges were, by society, regarded as open access and a democratic form of higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Beginning with roughly twenty thousand students in the early 1920s, community college enrollment has ballooned with recent data revealing community colleges accommodated 13 million students in 2011-12, comprising 45% of all undergraduates nationally (2013 Community College Fast Facts, 2013; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). During the lifespan of the community college, many factors have influenced its mission and activities. The changing political and economic climate of the United States from the early 1980s until the present have directly impacted the students enrolled and makes the case for a greater focus on institutional services, such as career and job placement.
Prior to the 1980s, the Truman Commission’s 1947 report provided the framework for what higher education entailed. Via this report, explicitly promoting democratic ideals, exploring solutions to social problems and serving the public were the fundamentals to the community college and widely enacted at institutions. This was largely the norm until the 1980s (Ayer, 2010). During the presidency of Ronald Reagan the Jobs Training Partnership Act of 1982 (JTPA) was enacted. As Svorny (1996) summarized, “The JTPA shifted control over job training programs from city and county governments to state governments and included an increased role for business in the operation of the training programs” (p. 230); the shift was the first of its kind. During the bill signing President Reagan (1982) remarked, “State and local government officials, business and labor leaders, and other members of the private sector will plan area programs in private industry councils.” Further rhetoric that promoted a smaller government role in colleges and universities, included President Reagan’s (1983) comment that “the cost of education is primarily the responsibility of the family” while signing student loan legislation.

In addition, the College Board data as referenced by Gladieux (1995) showed that within the years of the Reagan administration, the proportion of federal grant aid fell nearly 10% from that of the mid-1970s and student loan usage increased to fill the gap. While technical or vocational training has been a purpose of the community college for decades previous, this period began a transference towards what Levin (2005) asserted as the “community has become narrowly focused, often referring to an economic community, with students as economic entities” (p. 13). The ideology that federal and state entities supported higher education for the good of the public began to waver, as did the view of a student as a multifaceted individual (Levin, 2005).
Reinforcing this changing ideal, in both practice and lexicon, was the authorization of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 during the Clinton administration. Central to the ideology, as articulated in The “Plain English” version of the WIA (1998), was that to “allow adult customers to "purchase" the training they determine best for them. This market-driven system will enable customers to get the skills and credentials they need to succeed in their local labor markets” and opened the benefits to all adults 18 years and older, not just “economically disadvantaged adults” as in the JTPA. With each presidential administration, including that of George. W. Bush, the community colleges (because of their tradition of offering vocational training) could both benefit from the funding but by doing so could face a compromise in mission and objectives (Boyd, 2011).

The economic downturn of 2008-09 brought community colleges back into the forefront, because of their history of open access and status became the most affordable higher educational option (The White House, n.d.). President Obama has seemingly committed to this notion. In 2010, Congress approved two billion dollars of federal funding to support the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCT) Grant Program with a three-year allocation projection (TAACCT funding background, n.d.). To qualify for funding “applicants must provide documentation that demonstrates evidence of the following institutional policy and program components: 1) Employer Engagement; 2) Use of Labor Market Information (LMI); and 3) Third-party evaluation plans” (TAACCT frequently asked questions, n.d., p. 3). President Obama proposes to educate 5 million more students at community colleges by 2020, utilizing some of the TAACCT grant (The White House, n.d.). The language and focus of funding used, beginning with President Reagan, has intensified in deeming higher education a competitive sector, subordinating student interests to that of external economic markets. Boyd
(2011) described this transition as “from student is like a customer, to the student is a customer, to just customer” (p. 252).

Policies and subsequent funding to support the marketplace and decrease unemployment outpaced other higher educational aid programs between 1980 and 2013. In Geiger and Heller’s (2011) study of financial trends within higher education between 1980 and 2009. A 150 percent rise in community college tuition was documented, ten times the growth of the median family income. At the same time, state appropriations (as measured in constant dollars and on a per-student basis) actually declined 10%” (p. 6). Additionally, the purchase power of grant aid such as the federal Pell Grant at public institutions declined from 98% to 64% between 2002-03 and 2012-13 (College Board, 2012). This disparity has largely affected community colleges.

The changing political and economic policies directly influenced social norms regarding higher education. During this three-decade span, changing careers, both for personal reasons and because job markets demanded skills beyond a high school education, became more acceptable. Additionally, changes in family structure, including the spike in single parenthood, drove adults to college in greater numbers. Community colleges provided the most affordable, flexible and accessible option for these adult learners (Aslanian, 2001). Consequently, these economic and social changes provided an avenue for women to enter higher education in larger numbers (Cox & Ebbers, 2010). Addressing the differing needs from traditional students by the institution continues to be a struggle throughout the community college system.

Through the literature on community colleges and my qualitative study, I explored questions of what persistence factors are most salient for adult women learners, how the institution supports those factors and the perception of career services by these students. This paper will firstly review prominent theories on retention in higher education with a short address
of career-focused services, followed by an overview of empirical research focused on adult learners and persistence, then a description of my methodology, and finally I will offer the results of the study conducted at the northeast community college. A conclusion with implications and recommendation for best practice will also be included.

**Literature Review**

In the following review of current literature related to my research interest of the persistence factors of adult women enrolled in community college I hope to provide context and grounding for my study. Information begins at the macro level of general retention theory, moving into understanding the adult student and concluding with empirical studies focused on retention and persistence of this specific demographic group. The theories, models and research provided offers an important holistic conceptualization of the adult student in higher education.

**Theories and Models of Retention**

Retention and persistence are often interchangeable terms to describe re-enrollment of a student, semester over semester, at a higher education institution. Completing a degree or certificate is consistently the shared goal of both the student and the institution, although paths to graduation are highly varied, especially for adult students. While higher education institutions have not always valued completion rates, in recent decades scholars have attempted to formulate theories of retention and student learning (Thelin, 2011). Vincent Tinto’s (1975) seminal work began a trend of understanding the college student in a holistic manner. Tinto (1975) drew on Durkheim’s 1961 theory of suicide to formulate his theoretical model for college student retention. Tinto (1975) summarized Durkheim’s findings as “the likelihood of suicide in society increases when two types of integration are lacking…insufficient moral (value) integration and insufficient collective affiliation” (p. 91). Tinto (1975) took this principle and applied the college
student lens to test his model of retention. Specifically, the experience of a student transcended mere classroom and study activities to include extra and co-curricular influences in this purview. Striving to understand college dropout factors, Tinto (1975) complied information from many studies and asserted that the institution-individual interaction was experienced longitudinally and central to persistence. Additionally, positive correlations between increased integration of social and academic happenings and retention emerged. Both the students and institution are active in this process and positive peer-to-peer interactions were critical.

Commitment was also central to this theoretical model. Individual commitments included those to educational goals, financial contributions and time. As a student deepens their commitment in these areas at the institution, they demonstrated a higher likelihood of retention (Tinto, 1975). Although Tinto (1975) focused on student commitment, when commitment by institutions of higher education to student persistence were high, the students benefitted. Importantly, Tinto (1975) also recognized external influences in addition to the college environment on retention. Citing family background, including socioeconomic status and parent educational attainment status, individual traits, particularly cognitive ability, prior experiences in education and as stated previously, commitment to goals as the examples of external influences. In sum, this theoretical model argued that students would successfully retain when they spent a majority of their time and energy at the higher education institution with peers, faculty and support staff (Tinto, 1975).

This theory on retention proves problematic when applying it to non-traditional students and especially those at community colleges. Gleaned from information of traditional aged students enrolled at primarily four-year institutions, Tinto (1975) seemingly undercut community college value by offering, dropout “arise[s] not only from the fact that these institutions serve
largely lower status individuals, but…is also a function of the individual’s social status” (p. 112). In a highly praised follow-up text, Tinto (1993) continued to assert the necessity of face-to-face interaction for adult student to persist, even though he recognized the disproportionate challenge this poses from traditional students. Karp, Hughes and O’Gara (2008) attempted to apply Tinto’s retention model at community colleges. To accomplish this goal, the researchers interviewed 44 second semester community college students at two northeast institutions. Interview protocol focused on motivations to enroll, perceptions of coursework, relationships with peers and faculty and use of campus support services (Karp, Hughes & O’Gara, 2008). While they found that feeling integrated into the community college was important to students and led to a greater likelihood of persistence, it is important to note that the participant pool in the study did not solely include adults and did not factor in gender. Tinto’s (1975, 1993) matter of fact tone, limited attention to community college adult students and widespread application of his model without intensive assessment warrants further research to determine applicability for adult students. It may be the case that integration into the community college and personal interaction are critical for this population’s persistence, but it would be beneficial to understand how the students actualize this and to what extent the institution helps or hinders this process.

While Tinto laid the foundation for a broader understanding of college student retention, other scholars have focused on growing populations within higher education, including adults. Bean and Metzner (1985) chose to focus on non-traditional students in order to develop a theoretical model that is congruent with the experiences of these students. They recognized that previous retention theories heavily relied on social interaction among students and institutional players in understanding retention. However, the external responsibilities of family and work of non-traditional student lives, often precludes them from in-depth on campus interaction.
However, these non-traditional students enroll at increasing rates. For their purposes, students were considered non-traditional if they demonstrated any, some of all of the following: they were 25 years or older, were a commuter student to the institution or attended part time (Bean & Metzner, 1985). From their extensive review of existing literature, many themes emerged that deviated from Tinto and similar theorists in a variety of ways. This then led to the creation of their own theoretical model for non-traditional student retention. The researchers based much of their model on national data reporting increased enrollment of non-traditional students in higher education and the backgrounds of those students.

Principally, Bean and Metzner (1985) gathered that four variables factored into decisions of persistence or dropout for non-traditional students. These included a low grade point average (GPA), intent to dropout, personal characteristics or background and environmental influences. For these researchers, low GPA and personal characteristics directly connect to performance in high school, whereas resolution to leave the institution factors in personal commitment to goals, psychological disposition and academic integration. Unlike Tinto’s theory, with this model the most influential variable on retention was environment. Environmental variables include finances, employment status, support from those in non-collegiate social circles, obligations to family, and availability to transfer institutions (Bean & Metzner, 1985). If the environmental variables, particularly duties to family, are favorable for the non-traditional student then they are more likely to persist, even if academic or psychological factors are sources of challenge. As clearly stated by Bean and Metzner (1985), “for nontraditional students, environmental support compensates for weak academic support, but academic support will not compensate for weak environmental support” (p. 492). While the environment of the college campus is influential and important to non-traditional students, the off-campus environment can easily wrench these
students away from their academic goals. Bean and Metzner (1985) poignantly argued that they were not disregarding the importance of social integration between non-traditional students and faculty, staff and peers in the overall college experience, just that there was no empirical evidence that showed a significant relationship to retention at the time of their research. Interestingly, Bean and Metzner (1985) identified gender as part of the personal characteristics, based on findings from retention studies at four-year institutions, and hypothesized that transfer opportunities and family obligations would affect retention most significantly for women at two-year institutions. The theory of Bean and Metzner (1985) began to diversify the body of knowledge on retention and persistence and called for a greater understanding of the needs of non-traditional adult students.

Contemporaries of theorist Tinto, Bean and Metzner (1985) have become increasingly aware of the complexities involved in the adult student experience and that the understanding of retention must expand accordingly. In Chaves’s (2006) article *Involvement, Development and Retention: Theoretical Foundations and Potential Extensions for Adult Community College Students*, the author offers an alternative student-focused retention conceptualization. Citing the lack of comprehensiveness in previous retention studies regarding adult students, coupled with the breadth and complexity of adult student experience in community college, Chaves (2006) encouraged a model that included tenets of:

- Identity development, students’ sense of mattering and validation, gender differentiation and the central effects of one’s cultural background. These factors ultimately coalesce to influence, positively or negatively, an adult student’s ability to persist in college…[T]heory about student involvement and engagement, student development and adult learning…should inform how we educate adult community college students (p. 140).

Chaves (2006) strove to provide higher education professionals with an orientation to the various foremost theorists and recommendations for intertwining their ideas to create best practices.
Chaves (2006) began by differentiating the theorists into categories that addressed various aspects including engagement (retention) with the works of Tinto and Astin in relation to retention and Chickering, Rendon, Belenky et al., and Schlossberg for identity and mean-making development. The other defined category was learning and curricular support and focused on theorist Knowles’ advocacy for assisting adults to learn by incorporating life experiences into the classroom, a field known an andragogy, as opposed to pedagogy (Chaves, 2006). For the purposes of my research project, it is important to note that Chaves (2006) called for additional research on women as adult learners at community college because not only is this population growing in enrollment but that often preferences for learning are incongruent with those of men. Chaves’s (2006) argument for integrating identity development, learning theory and retention theory, while complicated offers an alternative to previous retention theory. This may be more representative of the students accessing community colleges and therefore benefit those students the most.

While the above theories rightfully focus on the individual student, institutions of higher education can positively affect retention rates through a concerted, authentic and meaningful effort. One approach offered by Wild and Ebbers (2002) advocated that addressing retention was most effective when the community college personalized their efforts. Community colleges must define retention, establish criteria to measure retention across the institution and utilize pertinent research findings to frame their assessments. To accomplish the goals Wild and Ebbers (2002) suggested a variety of institutional actions including creating a retention task force with an administrative leader, defining terms such as persistence and establishing retention goals. After establishing this institutional infrastructure, community colleges should collect data via surveys, focus groups and any other appropriate method to glean information that can inform practice
related to retention. Combining new data and existing research creates a plan for retention, which the task force then assesses and modifies as needed. In practice, community college members can improve retention rates by providing staff and faculty training on the subject, continually review institutional policies to ensure inclusivity and generally foster collaboration (Wild and Ebbers, 2002). Although many theories of retention focus on the perceptions, behaviors and contextual environment of the individual, Wild and Ebbers’s (2002) model provides concrete action steps that the community college can take to proactively contribute to the persistence of students including adult women. Creating a retention task force, collecting data on students including through focus groups, establishing retention training programs for personnel and applying for grants to fund pilot programs are all methods they suggested.

**Career-focused Services and Retention**

A common theme throughout the literature on retention is that institutional environment factors into the dropout or persistent decision-making process for traditional and nontraditional students. Often the presence and consequent interaction with support service offices contributes, positively or negatively with student satisfaction and commitment to the institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Through the various political and economic changes, outlined previous, of the last three decades, community colleges experienced greater pressure to prepare the needed workforce in the regions they serve. Not only do adult students comprise a large percentage of this plan, but the motivator to enroll is generally based on career goals. As Boggs (2004) stated, “in order to stay competitive in today’s volatile economy, people are using community colleges to gain practical, marketable employment skills…lifelong learning is an economic necessity for staying employed or becoming re-employed” (p. 8). It stands to reason then that understanding the influence of career-focused services at community colleges is highly important. However,
there is limited research conducted exploring the relationship between career and workforce services for adult learners at community colleges and persistence.

Luzzo (1999) cited a 1989 study conducted by Healy and Reilly, which strove to understand the career-decision making needs of non-traditional versus traditional students. The researcher drew conclusions by utilizing survey data from over 3,000 students, in which the participants were asked to rate their needs as major, minor or none to seven career areas. Findings indicated that nontraditional students do have needs and often assert an exploratory attitude while enrolled. The study found that nontraditional students had minor need for all seven career areas. Assistance in aligning course selection with career goals and interweaving interests with career rated most salient to non-traditional students (Luzzo, 1999).

Specific to adult women learners Quimby and O’Brien (2004) focused on career self-efficacy, which they described as the “confidence in managing tasks associated with successful career choices” (p. 324). The researchers were interested in understanding the characteristics of career efficacy and perceptions of barriers to this for adult women who did and did not have children. To accomplish this the researchers first surveyed 354 women enrolled in a mid-Atlantic university for demographic information. The researchers then divided these 354 women into two groups, based on whether or not they had children. Following this, they asked the two groups to complete the Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale and the Self-Efficacy Expectations for Role Management in order to fulfill the purposes of the study. The findings of their qualitative study of nontraditional women in college included the existence of three primary barriers to career self-efficacy. The barriers were: multiple conflict role between on-campus and off-campus environments, a lack of support in pursuing a nontraditional career and parental responsibilities. In addition the participants demonstrated “moderately strong levels of self-efficacy…high level
of confidence in their ability…[and] high levels of perceived social support” (Quimby & O’Brien, 2004, p. 328). High levels of social support may allow for the positive sense of self and ability to persist. Understanding career services through the lens of an adult student is critical in assessing institutional commitment to the persistence of this expanding non-traditional population.

**Understanding the Adult Student**

The aforementioned NCES list of seven characteristics allows researchers and scholars to define the non-traditional adult student. However, effective higher education institutions and scholars should gain a more in depth understanding of the context under which adults find themselves at institutions. As Aslanian (2001) stated, “to understand an adult’s life schedule is to understand his or her need for learning” (p. 57). Currently, most higher education institutions assume that all enrolled students can equally engage both socially and academically as their traditional student theories advocate. Unfortunately, for adult students, class schedules, teaching style and services offered emerge and operate under this supposition (Sorey & Duggan, 2008). In contrast to this norm, central to the adult student experience is the balance between work, personal, familial and student responsibilities. Many adult students have families, work full or part time, are changing careers, or are financially disadvantaged and yet pursue higher education, especially at community colleges in higher numbers and for a variety of reasons and intentions (Kasworm, 2003, Kasworm, 2012, Spellman, 2007, & White, 2001). This is very much the reality of women learners at community colleges (White, 2001 & Johnston, 2010). Institutions must recognize this balancing act, but more importantly, they should understand and address these circumstances for the benefit of student persistence.
As higher education professionals became aware of this new enrollment trend, there arose a dialogue about transforming best practices to meet the differing needs of adult students. One of the often cited scholars is Carol Kasworm (2003) because of her advocacy for adult student success. Kasworm (2003) outlined important differentials between non-traditional and traditional students in an effort to raise awareness of adult student needs. Kasworm (2003) found that adults selected institutions based on accessibility, cost effectiveness, availability of courses via in class and online delivery. Additional traits of adult students include a work-student role negotiation, often resulting in part time enrollment and a higher likelihood of family obligations, including child and elder care (Kasworm, 2003). In addition to observations made by scholars such as Kasworm (2003, 2012), perception of self is valuable information to consider when approaching retention holistically. Compton, Cox and Laanan (2006) wrote about adult students and their “challenges, characteristics and transitional roles” (p. 73). Through surveying current literature and analyzing institutions such as Marylhurst University, Sinclair Community College and others, they surmised that adult students were motivated to enroll to increase or diversify their workforce skills and viewed themselves as workers first and as students secondly. For adult students the life experiences they bring with them to the institution are a rich source of knowledge that inseparable from the identity as a student (Compton, Cox & Laanan, 2006). Recognizing and valuing these contributions of adult students, especially in the classroom, can contribute to overall social integration into the intuition and therefore retention (Spellman, 2007). Women as adult learners often face barriers to both enrollment and persistence at community college at disproportionate levels and thus an important group to understand better through empirical research.
Research on Specific Adult Learner Populations

Few researchers have conducted studies on persistence influences and factors for adult students at community colleges and even fewer about women. Dayton (2005) studied factors of adult success enrolled in three community colleges, West Valley College, Cabrillo College and Canada College, all located in California. The researcher connected to on-campus offices frequented by returning adult students and advertised to students through faculty to recruit participants. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 57 and varied according to race, prior educational attainment and academic major at the community college. A common thread amongst the adult learners was their background of either employment or family responsibilities prior to enrollment. In twenty-two interviews, Dayton (2005) and the participants explored questions related to the motivators of enrollment, the challenges to persistence and support for persistence. Motivators included external pressures, changing employment status, the prospect of increased financial security and alignment of interests with occupational pursuits. Once enrolled the students described different challenges, which included a lack of financial resources, the predominance of English as a second language, a lack of academic and social confidence, balancing student, employment and childcare responsibilities.

Contributions to persistence were highly striking in supportive networks comprised of friends, family and employers. Secondarily, aspects of the community college factored into persistence. Of importance was support from faculty, counselors and services offered (Dayton, 2005). Dayton (2005) summarized, “instructors made them feel they belonged at the school, were responsive to their individual needs, and made classrooms a welcoming community in which to learn” (p. 54). When interactions with financial aid services were positive, the students cited this as an important persistence factor. Conversely, lack of information or accessibility to
financial aid was a highly cited barrier for these students. Classes offered to develop their English language aptitude also positively correlated to retention. Interestingly, Dayton’s (2005) results revealed that students viewed themselves as highly significant to persistence. “I am studying this for myself…I am focused, really focused now. Because I already am on the other side and I know what it takes” (p. 57) was exclaimed by one participant (Dayton, 2005).

Similar to Dayton (2005), Capps (2012) strove to determine “what the experience of persistence was like, how personal and institutional factors influenced that persistence and why adult students persisted” (p. 39). Capps (2012) performed a qualitative study of both men and women at a Salt Lake Community College in Salt Lake City, Utah. Twenty-eight adult students participated in this study and had to demonstrate two or more of the following characteristics, 25 years or older, full time employment, part time coursework, caring for children, financially independent and returning adult student, to meet eligibility requirements. The researchers interviewed participants on three occasions and within this period, persisters and non-persisters were included. Data gathered from both groups and interview questions focused on “the personal and institutional influences affecting their decisions about college persistence and their own explanations for persistence” (Capps, 2012, p. 40). Contradicting theories such as Tinto (1975, 1993), this study revealed adult persistence was strongly dependent on personal motivation and degree of support by family. While external factors helped ensure retention, others such as family problems, medical issues and loss of employment were the primary reasons for dropout. A second theme emerged from the data collected, in that while the adult students did not mention the community college as a factor, faculty played a large role in their persistence (Capps, 2012).

Paralleling Dayton’s (2005) findings, participants at the Utah community college, cited the fact that professors that took a personal interest in them, created space for acceptance and
appreciation and constructively engaged them academically, as being valuable to the experience. To assess the overall community college influence on the participants, Capps (2012) asked them to compare their current experience to a different institution type, such as a university. Responses revealed that the community colleges had a higher capacity to treat the adult students like individuals. The students valued the small size of institution and were skeptical that a university could provide them with the same type of personal interaction with the faculty, as they currently experienced it (Capps, 2012).

To specifically address women’s experiences as adult students in community college, Johnston (2010) explored correlations between age, gender and English as the primary language and the Education Participation Scale. Johnston (2010) described The Education Participation Scale as being comprised of “(1) communication improvement; (2) social contact; (3) educational preparation; (4) professional advancement; (5) family togetherness; (6) social stimulation; and (7) cognitive interest” (p. 8) and suggested that results indicated positive influences on participation in the community college. To collect demographic information and data related to these factors, the researchers sent an electronic survey to a random sample of 3,000 students, including those 18 years or old, enrolled in at least one credit bearing course and inclusive regarding gender. Johnston (2010) evaluated responses and found that professional advancement “defined as gaining a promotion in a current position or finding a better employment opportunity elsewhere” (p. 100) was the factor women found most motivational to continue in the community college. After professional advancement, participants cited the following influences as most to least important: cognitive interest, educational preparation, communication improvement, family togetherness, social contact and social stimulation.
Interestingly, Johnston’s (2010) research found no statistically significant difference in the results of the seven factors between men and women. However, this finding, taken plainly, may be misleading based on the demographics of the participants, in that 72% were female identified and only 28% were male identified. Age was statistically significant for the communication improvement, social contact and social stimulation. Social contact, or developing friendships and social stimulation, or participation to curb psychological challenges such as loneliness were more important for younger students than for adults. Improvement of communication skills was important for adults, but ranked lower for younger community college students (Johnston, 2010).

Most pertinent to my proposed research study was the work done by Cox and Ebbers (2010) on this subject. Cox and Ebbers (2010) stated, “the purpose of this study was to describe, interpret, and analyze the educational experiences and factors contributing to the decision to persist for adult, female, part-time student currently enrolled at a community college” (p. 337). The researchers chose students at a Midwest community college through purposeful sampling and conducted interviews to gather data. Their participants were five adult women, 25 years or older, represented a wide range of majors and employment statuses. Driving factors for enrollment in the community college included a combination of employment needs, desire for personal fulfillment and supportive family members (Cox and Ebbers, 2010). Findings from their three-part interview process produced information useful for practice and examining retention theories. For these adult students, support systems were critical for persistence. These included their parents, their children and the other adult women students at the community college. This peer relationship finding is certainly a contribution to the existing body of knowledge on retention for adult women. Parents offered both childcare support and encouragement to
continue, while their children were a source of inspiration. In congruence with other research on adult students, the participants in this study reiterated the existence of a balancing act betwixt being a student and their demanding external roles.

A positive learning environment also contributed to persistence in this study. Faculty and supportive staff often create space for a positive experience with the campus culture. One student explained “they [campus instructors] see things in you that you don’t see in yourself, and they take the extra time to show you and guide you and put interest in you” (Cox & Ebbers, 2010, p. 353). Faculty were flexible in responding to the women’s life obligations when it came to missing class or assignments. Additionally, many students felt intimidated and lacked confidence in their academic abilities in entering community college. These feelings dissipated through a welcoming classroom atmosphere and after creating a support network between other adult learners. When the women discovered like student in the class and around campus they felt more confident in their ability to persist (Cox & Ebbers, 2010).

Although support systems both on campus and in their personal lives contributed to persistence of these female adult learners at community college, another factor stood out as the most important. Cox and Ebbers (2010) termed this factor aspirational capital and defined it as “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (p. 354). The adult women in this study established a strong and definitive sense of drive, determination and commitment through comparing their pre-college lives to the opportunities open to via persistence and completion.

The studies of Dayton (2005), Capps (2012), Johnston (2010) and Cox and Ebbers (2010) created space for the female adult community college voice to shine through and entrench their importance in the higher educational landscape. The aforementioned researchers recognized the
intense barriers adult women often face becoming and maintaining college enrollment. Secondly, they cited the increasing growth of this population in higher education, often outpacing men and traditional aged students. Finally, they identified a stark lack of empirical research concerned with the vast experiences of women in higher education and community college in particular. To have such a large population voiceless and marginally understood in higher education is a disservice to all students, traditional and non-traditional. In a sweeping study of seven higher educationally focused journals, including the Journal of Higher Education and Community College Review, published between 1990 and 2003, Donaldson and Townsend (2007) found that of over 3200 articles only 1%, or 41 articles, concentrated on adult students in undergraduate institutions. This fact, in combination with all cited information thus far, inspired my research project.

Understanding the concepts and successful models of college student retention is important for best practices in higher education. However, as demonstrated through the limited literature, the adult learner population is increasing and entering our institutions with differing challenges to address. Within the population of adult students, women face distinctive challenges, yet overlooked in research. This research study, sought to understand what contributes to and also what hinders the persistence of women enrolled in community college. Gaining this knowledge will inform student affairs practice, efforts for retention and career services and provide a platform to self-articulate this particular student voice.

Methodology

Through the literature on both retention and persistence theories and studies, exploring factors amongst adult women learners at the community college there appears to be a need for additional studies focused on this topic of higher education. For my study at a northeast
community college, I employed a constructivist methodological paradigm as a framework for the research. Mertens (2010) described the fundamentals of a constructivist paradigm as “knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process, and that researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (p. 16). Additionally, constructivist researchers value a researcher-participant relationship based on the ethics of “reflexivity, rapport and reciprocity” (Mertens, 2010, p. 18). This purview considers qualitative, rather than quantitative methodology of substance, wherein data gathered comprehensively focuses on the perceptions of the participants’ realities. Context, environmental influences and background of participants in constructivist research are also important facets within the data collection process. Importantly, researchers are devoid of assumptions and hypotheses and rather allow the findings to develop organically by participants. With the participant voice central, constructivist researchers then interpret themes that emerge through this type of research to inform best practices and contribute to social justice advocacy (Mertens, 2010).

Utilizing the constructivist paradigm with adult or non-traditional women learners at a community college provided the most content rich findings, constructed by the participants with little but still evident influence of myself as the researcher. Additionally, this population’s experience with regard to retention and persistence has not received full attention from researchers or institutions. Constructivist research addressed this void and provided a greater understanding of the factors, as the participants held the greatest influence in the focus of the study and the results. As seen throughout the literature on this topic, adult women in community college are often a vulnerable population that warrants a social justice-focused response. As Aslanian (2001) stated, “adult students lead complex and engaged lives” (p. 56).
constructivist-based cognizance thrives on, and values complexity and therefore fit the theme of research conducted.

I conducted the research using individual student interviews. An interview allows the primary focus to be on in-depth information gathering in an environment void of peer judgment. The answers given are of the purest demonstration of perception. In aligning with constructivist essentials interviews as Mertens (2010) stated, “get [the] full range and depth of information” (p.352). The flexibility inherent in interviews accommodates more fully for the schedules and responsibilities of adult women learners (Mertens, 2010).

For this research study, I recruited participants from one community college, Bristol Community College, through on campus advertisements and outreach via email. Bristol Community College is a mid-size institution located in southern Massachusetts. To efficiently and effectively recruit participants, I utilized the expertise of what Seidman (2006) called a “gatekeeper.” A gatekeeper is often an administrator at an institution that has access to resources and pools of potential participants. Gatekeeper support not only provides logistical access but also contributes legitimacy to the perception of the researcher and their intentions. For this study, I worked with a gatekeeper, Dr. Suzanne Buglione, Dean of the Lash Center for Teaching and Learning at Bristol Community College, to gain institutional knowledge pertinent to the research, access to the institution for recruitment and counsel on conducting the interviews.

Given the academic and economic vulnerability of this participant pool, confidentiality and privacy were important logistical factors. Constructivist research insists on ethical considerations when working with participants (Mertens, 2010). To ensure ethical practices, I required an informed consent agreement of the participants, conducted the study in an on-campus, convenient location that was non-descript and private or via a private phone call. I kept
demographic information confidential and findings will be reported using pseudonyms for participants. Additionally to gain the most authentic insights, compensation for participation was minimal, but I did offer a ten-dollar gift card to Target. I provided contact information to the participants if they should have questions or concerns about the study and appropriately addressed sensitive issues as they arose.

The fruits of my recruitment phase yielded eleven participants who qualified based on being female, 25 years or older, and having had attending the community college for three semesters or more. An additional two participants revealed information during the interview that precluded them from the study. Of the eleven participants, all self-identified as female, white, and at least 25 years old. All but one adult learner had children. Other interesting demographics include that four of the women had completed their associates degree, with three pursuing a bachelor’s completion program at the community college, and the fourth working towards a second associates degree. Three had obtained a high school diploma and three had completed a GED before entering the community college. The eleventh participant obtained her associate degree at the community college, transferred to a four-year institution and is currently in the process of a hybrid online-on campus master’s degree. Common to their educational path was taking time off in between graduating high school or completing the GED, although one was unclear on this point. The length of time spent at the community college ranged from four semesters to over sixteen. Salient to this study and the research on this topic was whether the participants demonstrated characteristics to be either moderately or highly non-traditional, as defined by NCES. See Table 1 below for full participant demographic information gained from a pre-interview demographic questionnaire. The given names are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.
As stated in the literature, Choy (2002) described that NCES considers a student moderately or highly non-traditional based on the amount of following characteristics they demonstrated.

Table 1: Participant demographic information of the eleven participants captured during a pre-interview questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Time lapse between HS and CC entry</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest level of education</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Total Semesters</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Financially independent of parents</th>
<th>Career aspiration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paige</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>To work in Human Service Advocacy for community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Student Services at College level</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>Student Services at College level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>To be a great leader and proficient in area of expertise</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>Environmental Scientist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>PHD in Social Psychology</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>1–6th grade Science Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>HS diploma</td>
<td>Environmental Engineering</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>Environmental Scientist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>HS diploma &amp; college certificate</td>
<td>1-6th grade Science Teacher</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>1-6th grade Science Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>HS diploma &amp; college certificate</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arlene</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>Be in the criminal justice field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Beth</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>GED/HS diploma</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>Social work or business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joan</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>Accounting Teacher or own preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>Environmental Engineering</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>Own own business in publishing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
college enrollment, part-time attendance, simultaneous full time employment, financially independent from their parents, care for a dependent other than a spouse, consider themselves single parents, completed a GED or did not complete high school. Two or three signified moderate status and four or more connote highly non-traditional. The women in this study self-identified which characteristics applied to them in a pre-interview questionnaire. Presuming confusion, one limitation to this study was that a few women did not indicate being financially independent from their parents, although their age of 25 or older is indicative of this characteristic as based on the federal financial aid guidelines (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). For the purposes of this study, I considered all participants financially independent from their parents. All participants were either moderately or highly non-traditional, with four adult women learners demonstrating two or three characteristics and the remainder exhibiting four or more. As research has shown, the challenges to college persistence increase with each added characteristic. Given the scope of topics from the literature, I chose to ask questions related to this range and participants spent between 20 and 75 minutes answering them during the interviews.

As mentioned, I asked questions either in person or over the phone and one limitation to this dual method was evident. From my perception, those who I interviewed over the phone seemed a bit more reserved and more skeptical of the project or myself. Although I explained the research project in the informed consent form, at times via email or phone while scheduling the interview and before beginning the questioning, it is interesting to note that, the phone interviews tended to be about 10 minutes shorter than the in-person interviews, except for one. Another important limitation to my study is that four of the participants worked at the community college at the time of the interview. Potentially a limitation because their knowledge of the community college could be more extensive in a way that would sway their responses to questions directly
about the institution. This limitation was evident when, for example, I asked these participants about a support service on campus and they listed all the services they knew were available as opposed to ones utilized. This trend, however, did not appear to drastically affect the quality or relevance of information for this study and instead is reported here for better context of participants.

Questions in this study focused on two major themes, persistence factors and perceptions of a particular support service, career services. The first block of questions focused on participants’ broad view of the community college and their experience, with questions investigating their motivation to enroll in that college, what challenged their persistence, what helped retain them, and how the care of a child or other affected their educational journey. The second half of the research protocol strove to gather career-related information, including perceptions of support services at the community college, what external factors, if any, bolstered their preparations and what change they would advocate for in relation to career support if they hypothetically were the president of Bristol Community College. A final question asked them to provide a piece of advice to a future adult woman learner based on their experience. In sum, these questions delved deeply into the perceived realities of eleven individual adult women learners and the information conveyed will inform the greater higher educational community on how to best serve this growing population. Appendix A contains the pre-interview demographic questionnaire and Appendix B offers the full protocol.

The persistence of adult women enrolled in community colleges has not been an often explored topic within the higher education discourse, even as the percentage of these students increases at a faster rate than traditional student enrollment. To ensure relevancy and effectiveness for these adult learners, researchers must continually examine prominent retention
theories such as those by Tinto (1975) and Bean and Metzner (1985) through empirical research. The studies of Dayton (2005), Capps (2012) and Cox and Ebbers (2010) explored persistence and findings included that a balancing act between the student and familial roles existed for adult women learners. Additionally, lack of both institutional and personal support was a dominant barrier in findings (Quimby & O’Brien, 2004). Interestingly, Capps (2012) and Cox and Ebbers (2010) found that adult women learners contributed persistence to their individual commitment to perseverance as well as other factors. I will contribute to this important topic by next exploring the rich responses of my study participants to questions asked of persistence, the role of the community college and perceptions of career services as meeting their needs. Adult women are unique college students with rich life experiences, diverse motivations and aspirations that warrant equity as their traditional student counterparts in attention, consideration and action by higher education professionals to ensure their success. Next, I will share findings from my study, which comprise of areas of motivations for attendance, barriers to persistence, support for persistence, perceptions of career preparations and recommendations for change.

**Findings**

The information-rich interviews yielded important themes that will not only assist Bristol Community College in their support services for adult women at their institution, but also inform practitioners of this population’s unique context under with which they navigate their educational path towards graduation. Many of the findings support existing literature on the topic, while new information was also evident. Overall, those interviewed were dedicated to their success and expressive about their experience. Themes included 1) motivations for attendance 2) barriers to persistence 3) support for persistence 4) perception of the career planning process and 5) recommendations for change. In addition, the adult women learners in this study offered
suggestions for improvements that the community college should consider as they serve their complex student body.

**Motivations for Matriculation**

Similar to Dayton (2005) and Cox and Ebber’s (2010) findings and Boggs’s (2004) observations related to entering community college, the women expressed that economic motivators, including loss of employment, increasing their marketability in a challenging job market and cost efficiency, prompted entering college. One women expressed that in her 30 years of work in the human services field, she had trained numerous younger professionals who were quickly be promoted based on having an associate’s degree. She perceived enrolling in the community college as a way to move into a management position. Others referenced wanting a certain job and recognizing the requirements included more than a high school diploma or GED. Several of the women in this study referenced wanting a better job or experiencing unemployment as a reason for pursing a degree. Explained by participant Lauren, who completed both a certificate and associates degree “I lost my job. I came here [the community college]…because to go and apply for an administrative assistant job, that requires an associate’s degree. So time have changed and requirements have changed.” Interestingly, the literature was void of the role external agencies played in the enrollment decision-making process. Nearly half of the participants described various programs that provided financial and at times personal support for enrolling in college. These agencies included two different state initiatives and one for veterans, providing funding and an on-site advocate for students. These relationships also contributed to their overall persistence.

The most salient decision-making factor that most women held in common was the close proximity and perceived convenience of the community. Most of the women discussed this when
asked how they decided on Bristol Community College. One participant said, “it is local. When you think of community colleges, it is really the closest one.” This finding supports Kasworm’s (2003) findings through her study on adult learners at community college and the generally perception that community colleges are often easily accessible and cost efficient for adult women.

**Challenges to Persistence**

Once enrolled in college, adult women learners often face a myriad of challenges, which they experienced both within the institutional system and externally in their daily lives. One challenge many described was a lack of communication about services offered and procedures for tasks such as admission, tutoring, financial aid, internship opportunities, registration for classes and others. This aligns with the research findings of Dayton (2005) wherein clearly communicated information was an important factor in the overall experience of the adult learner and a lack proves challenging. Pamela, a student who completed an associate’s degree, said “they [professionals] do not seem to understand their job and the role they play, assisting people and seem to be more like “that is not my job”…as opposed to really working on it…They lose paperwork and cannot find things sent to you.” Similarly, many participants seemed to highly challenged by the academic advising during the course of their education path at the community college. Within this group there were a few that spoke passionately about the negative experiences they had, including taking needless courses, obtaining basic rather than major-specific information, added stress and the lack of consistency. Sara, a participant who explained a situation, where she had to leave her math placement test before it was finished resulting in placement in developmental level coursework reflected:

> Advising was difficult. Trying to locate one and making the appointments, and them not being familiar with the program you are taking. I took some unnecessary courses…I
actually took two math courses I did not need to take…but I wanted to withdraw but I could not because then I could not take the next math class…No one told me I could re-test…Not one person, not the math professor, not the adviser…Two unnecessary math course, that my husband pays out of pocket, plus the books…Two semesters I took five courses, just so I could catch up on those two that I lost.

Nearly all participants expressed a true sense of dedication and seriousness regarding academic success. The women in this study proudly told me of their grade point averages, graduation monikers of, for instance, ‘magna cum laude’ standing and average grades per class. Sara will be continuing her education at an Ivy League college once she completes her associate’s degree. Lauren, who also experienced taking additional unneeded classes, quipped:

I have always told [other students] that if you get a good adviser, hold on to them. And question it, if you are feeling that something is not right, question. Or go to someone else…because that is your education and you are paying for these classes.

Poor advising, as described by the participants had greater than surface implications, including additional time, energy and funds spent, and increased their overall stress level when attending the college. In a follow-up question, I asked a few participants if they knew details of the advising structure or how the community college assigned advisers, and their answers varied. Some said they did not know, while others described a walk-in center and a mix between faculty and professional staff. Resulting from the challenge with advising, some of the students began to self-advice, engage in informal advising with faculty in their academic major, and one participant changed her adviser and was more successful.

It is interesting to note that one of the participants, Janet, had a positive experience with the walk-in advising system. During her first walk-in advising appointment, she established a connection with the adviser and has maintained that relationship. In sum, through the participant responses, it appears that inconsistencies in academic advising and communication of pertinent
information are challenges the adult women learners had to navigate in order to continue on their graduation path.

Like much of the literature, included conclusions from Kasworm (2003), Cox and Ebbers (2010) and Capps (2012), external factors play a role in the ability to persist for this population. This finding based on the interviews also further validates the retention theory of Bean & Metzner (1985). Almost all of the women described that creating a family-student and sometimes work balance was a challenge. Jessica, a part-time student at the community college with two children explained:

> It is more of personal life changes. I started [the spring after graduating high school]…and I had no kids and in my second semester, I got pregnant with my first child and then my second. They are only 18 months apart. I never planned to not go full time, but my first semester I had at least four classes. I was trying to do too much. I was doing nights then, but now it is completely different. I cannot even do nights, so it is a lot of different things have happened in my personal life.

Similarly, Mary-Beth, a student who began part time after economic hardship and now is completing an associate’s degree in one year through a fast-track program said:

> I am a mother of two, so my children come first. It can be hard to manage everything at once. And I work full time…So you have to make a point to have family time…You get burnt out…[and] it’s making time for work, doing your best at work and school.

This balance between family responsibilities and completing their degree was very important to these women and they used many strategies to accomplish this goal. Setting boundaries, developing good time management skills, enrolling part time or participating in a fast track option, stopping out for a few semesters and utilizing family support structures were all techniques and necessities for those interviewed. Lauren said, “I try to set boundaries too, because family is important and personal matters are important. So trying to find that nice balance. And I am still trying to balance that, but my family has been supportive in my
education.” Self-determination, a similar finding by Cox and Ebbers (2010), support of family and from adult women peers in their classes seem to alleviate this challenge and support perseverance.

I was also interested in whether the role of being a caretaker, specifically to their children, affected their path to graduation. This was an appropriate subject based on the results reported by Cox and Ebbers (2010) and Capps (2012). The group represented a mixture related to the age of their children when they enrolled to pursue their degrees. For the majority, their children were of school age while attending, while others had adult children. Three had younger children who were less than 4 years old. Regardless of age, most said caring for their children did affect their educational path in ways, which included, feeling stressed to balance both responsibilities, developing time management skills and extending the completion time. Maria explained:

Its [caring for children] made it more stressful, because they come first. I feel sometimes like I am missing out, but they understand. We as a family, before I even signed up, sat down and said this is how it is going to be. Are you guys in on this? They understood and although they are only 12 and 9, they understood. Sometimes for me, more than them, I wish I was there more.

For Megan, a young mother pursing a science based degree, logistics of childcare provided challenging moments. She elaborated, “him [her son] going to kindergarten was really amazing. It makes it difficult with classes, I have to make sure I have someone to babysit him or have more day classes…I try to schedule classes all on the same day.” Accordingly, some mentioned that caring for dependents, spouses and ill family members prolonged their degree completion, the need to utilized online courses when available and the circumstances of care being emotionally and physically challenging. While the challenges of scheduling and arranging
alternative care methods was an obstacle to persistence, it was precisely these people in their lives that provided encouragement and inspiration to persist.

Many women in this study not only valued the education for their own benefit and well-being but also saw their persistence as a source of inspiration for their children and family members, much like the theme discovered by Cox and Ebbers (2010) and termed aspirational capital. One participant, Joan, who earned two associate’s degrees at the community college, one while her children were infants and the other while they were in high school, articulated:

There are tears. Wondering if I am doing the right thing. Why are not I working during these hours? I should be providing for my family. That is real. I am still able to semi-work and maintain a degree and I think for any older woman that is a benefit. It is a confidence booster for us too, especially single moms.

She then went on to describe a conversation she had with a single mother at the community college, reflecting:

There was this young woman who left an abusive relationship and I told her “that was strength, but now you are showing even more strength because no one is going to take this [college degree] away from you. You are a single mom trying to work and get off welfare.” To me that is the epitome of what a hero is. Someone to look up to.

Nearly half of those interviewed spoke of their children or immediate family members considering or attending either the same community college or another institution and they perceived their experience and commitment to their education a factor in that.

Another important finding was that four of the women did not express any challenges navigating the community college. They described having an overall positive experience along their graduation path. Barbara, a mother of one and currently pursuing a master’s degree after both an associate’s degree at the community and then transferring to a four year state institution exclaimed, “everything went really smoothly…here [the community college] no issues at all. Never. I always found someone.” Another, Joan said, “here at [the community college] I did not
have very many challenges. I am a pretty good student, actually a very good student, so that left it up to me to what is needed.” I interpreted this response and similar ones on this topic, to be more of a testament to their proactive disposition and seeking answers when any question arose. Although superficial, this sentiment describing a lack of challenges with the institutional system is valid for their experiences, critical thought should evaluate to what extent their self-drive was actually the catalyst for this finding. An inferred challenge to the student could be a lack of outreach by the community college to its students regarding services available. Participants perceived the multiple responsibilities of family, children, employment, degree completion and maximizing the 24-hour day, through good time management as a challenge to persistence, but many factors also contributed to their success in these seemingly interdependent areas.

Factors Supporting Persistence

Much like the conclusions of Dayton (2005), Capps (2012) and Cox and Ebbers (2010), the adult women learners in this study attributed their ability to persist on their well-established support systems. These support systems included faculty at the community college, family and friends both internal and external to the community college. Interestingly, I also found through my interviews that the results aligned heavily with the work of Cox and Ebbers (2010) and Dayton (2005), who specifically studied persistence among adult women at community colleges. My study adds weight to the importance of self-drive and commitment in persistence for this population. This mind-set of perseverance is interrelated with the support systems for these women.

Faculty were, for the majority of participants, a major factor in their persistence and overall satisfaction with their educational experience with the community college. Whether an in-class or online professor, the sentiment was that faculty were helpful, encouraging and
flexible. It appeared that faculty members personalized the education and valued the individual. Sara, a participant emphatically stated, “the professors are great…Most of them are very helpful and willing to take the time. I take about half of my classes online and the professors always make themselves available, even though it is an online course. That is very helpful.” Accordingly, when issues with familial responsibilities arose, participants felt the faculty understood them. Arlene, an adult learner who is graduating this spring with her associate’s after persisting through ten years of coursework, commented, “I had a lot of different teachers, because I have been here for a long time. They know when a student is just giving an excuse, but if you are honest and tell them the truth they are very helpful.” She described periods of stopping-out or missing classes due to caring for her daughter who experienced fluctuating mental health issues. During these challenges, she explained that faculty would let her make-up tests and class assignments without penalizing her course grade and were genuinely interested in her success as a person. These personalized efforts made by the faculty led her to re-enroll because Arlene perceived the educational environment as supportive and welcoming.

Deepening this perceived helpfulness was the expression of faculty support specifically course selection, encouragement to persist and career exploration. As Lauren described her ongoing meaningful professor-student relationship, she referred to, “a professor, a mentor [and] is still, encouraged me to come back [for the associate’s degree]…and I graduated magna cum laude.” Lauren went on to describe how this same professor assisted her with career exploration while a student and invited her back year after year to speak with the class on perseverance.

In addition to the role faculty play in the ability to persist for this group of students, support from family members was key. Almost all of the participants expressed this sentiment and the support was evident in both emotional encouragement and logistical actions of family
and friends. Bean and Metzner’s (1985) theory on persistence as opposed to Tinto’s (1975) view was supported by this strong correlation. In the studies of Dayton (2005), Capps (2012) and Cox and Ebbers (2010), support systems both internal and external to the college were central to persistence and re-enrollment semester after semester. Paralleling their findings, my study revealed varying degrees of influence. Adult women learners most often cited a nuclear family of spouses and children, followed by parents and siblings, then faculty members, other adult learners and friends. Janet, a mother of two young children, poignantly remarked, “the support from my family [has helped]. I could not; I cannot go to school without their support. Everyone stepped in, [has been] stepping up and helping.” Many described people in their lives helping with practical responsibilities like childcare and transportation. Mary Beth, a full time student and employee described:

Number one, I have to give kudos to my husband, because without him there is no way I could manage everything. He has picked up the load with especially the kids…He has done it all. From the littlest things, like grocery shopping because I do not have time…I have a very supportive family. Without them I would not be able to pull through it [coursework].

Family, friends and faculty were also an apparent source of inspiration when choosing to enroll or deciding on a major. A few of the participants described things like job shadowing a parent, encouragement from employers, perspectives from friends in similar career fields, and other important forms of support. Overall, there was a sense that not only did they depend on their familial support systems for their own persistence but also were encouraged by the idea that degree attainment would better the lives of their spouses, children and grandchildren.

Classmates, especially other female adult students, were important to the participants when reflecting on what helps them persist through college. Arlene commented, “we [classmates] support each other. Sometimes you have a bad day and they say, “ok you can do it,
we will study, it will be ok.” It is important to have a couple of friends and family to support [you].” In a follow-up, I asked Arlene if many of her classmates were adults, and she responded:

Yes, adults. Most of them are in the same situation I am in, they are older, they have kids, they understand best our situation. You are not going to explain to a 20 year old, because they are not going to understand. They are still young, they do not have a family or responsibilities like we do. We have to work, to do good in school…so they will not understand the same as another adult, another 40 year old.

Interestingly, the literature, including Cox and Ebbers (2010) only narrowly commented on this notion of classmate support, while many women in this study spoke enthusiastically about the critical meaning it had for their experience. This finding was contradictory to that of Johnson’s (2010) work on persistence of adult students at community college. Social contact and stimulation ranked low among those participants, while most interviewed in this study valued these aspects of the collegiate experience. Additionally, one of the strongest findings of this study was the definitive sense of self-drive and determination woven throughout the answers of many questions asked. While advancing economically or vocationally may have been a driving factor of their enrollment, the pursuit of cognitive interest, boost to individual self-confidence and determination to succeed were undeniable persistence factors.

This finding aligns specifically with Dayton’s (2005) and Capps’s (2012) conclusions on the perception of self being highly significant to persistence and Cox and Ebbers’s (2010) notion of aspirational capital. Pamela, a mother to seven children ranging from adult aged to primary school aged said, “I was just really determined that it [associates degree] was going to get done…I have always wanted to do psychology, so I said you know what, I am going to go do it now.” Barbara, another adult learner explained:

I was able to overcome the challenges, because I was an older student. I am not easily intimidated…I am not a quitter. I may have to go around a path, but I am not a quitter. I do not give up. I think it is because I have had to take care of myself [for a while].
A staunch sense of perseverance and advocating for self was evident with a majority of the women proudly exclaimed their grade point averages at some point during the interview. Barbara went on to describe how her time at the community college for her associates degree lit a “spark” in her for a love of learning. As Barbara is now pursuing a master’s degree, the passion for learning remains a driving force to persistence. Many of the women perceived this love of learning in not only themselves, but of their classmates. Joan poetically stated:

I think as women we are pretty strong and I think as older women, we have seen life a little bit…I have a lot to give and a lot to learn. I think adult women learners are those who really love to learn. They want to intake everything they can and whatever we take out of it, we take out of it. We are strong, we are vulnerable, especially when families are involved, but we are dedicated. I think a lot of people underestimate the female learner…I think that is what people forget, that we care.

Related to this sense of confidence in ability and personal strength, one unexpected finding presented itself. When asked whether they were planning to seek a further degree or enter the work force upon graduation almost all of the participants were planning or currently pursuing a degree beyond the associate level. As many were place-bound, they planned to attend a regional four-year state institution or were currently at a bachelor’s degree completion program housed at the community college. However, those that were in their mid to late twenties were open to relocating. About half of the participants utilized or were planning to use the transfer service support at the community college and others relied on their own navigational abilities of the transfer process. This half described the quality of the transfer service support at the community college with both positive and negative experiences and sentiments. Much like other interactions with campus offices, a lack of in-depth and student specific information was a source of frustration for some of the participants. With this sense of love of learning, interest in pursuing their academic field at a bachelor’s, master’s and in one case an intended PhD, and
discussion of economic benefits of degree attainment, I further examined the role of specific support services, particularly career services.

**Perception of Career Services**

A trend in higher education, as outlined by Levin (2005) and Gladieux (1995), of moving away from foundational values of serving the community to a mindset of training a workforce and personal economic gain as a motivator was also part of this study. Before interviewing the participants, I attributed career support services as a central part of this trend. Reasoning that if students are pursuing education for job attainment, then career services would be utilized. I thought this would be even more important to adult learners, although there was limited empirical research on the topic. Given this notion, I wanted to gauge the perception of career services and support at the community college, and determine other factors that influenced their preparations for entering or re-entering the career field. Of those interviewed, very few had utilized the career services and generally were unaware of available specific support. However, of those that had not used the services, more than half had a positive perception of the assistance available. As Mary Beth mentioned, “I have not used them [career services], but I also haven’t heard anything negative about it. I know there are folks that do use it and I guess it is very helpful.”

The point of contact for those that had accessed services was during a course, where the professor introduced them to the office, job alert emails or a drop in appointment. Overall, there was no sense of connection to career offices or positive impact it could have on their future, even when economic factors motivated their enrollment. As Lauren, who experienced career services only through a professor’s prompt explained:

Everyone has to work and have some sort of income…so that is where that [career services and job opportunity emails] tied in. I think that is where it tied into the [business]
class. But I am not sure where the career center would come in any other class or where it comes in with other students at the community college. I do not know how they reach out.

I found it interesting that most of the women gave an excuse for not utilizing career services, even though that was not the question asked. A number of them viewed career services as irrelevant because they already knew the direction they wanted for a career, resonating with their strong sense of self-drive. This finding and evident lack of interaction with career services is similar to Quimby and O’Brien’s (2004) deductions of adult women learners’ high levels of career self-efficacy. When asked about her interaction with career services, Barbara declared, “nothing really because I knew where I was going. I never attended the career fairs.” Aligned with the work of Boggs (2004), others were already working in the career field and merely needed the degree to keep or reach a higher job title. Another cited a lack of time and taking classes at a satellite campus as reasons for not utilizing career services offered. To note, two participants actively sought out the resources of career services. Their experiences were polar opposites. One claimed that after a positive introduction to career services by a professor, they placed her with a local job for a time, but was not a good fit for the employer and left after a few months. The second, Megan, had a less positive experience and explained:

When I went to the career counseling…I wanted to leave because I could have done it all by myself. [The career counselor said] “indeed.com, monster.com or Google jobs for your major.” Oh really, because I would not have known that [sarcastic tone]. He said he would email me…a newsletter with links to resume writing…I never got it. He showed me how to use all the links and he never sent it to me.

It appears that career support services offered at the community college was not influential in the experiences or persistence of the eleven participants. As a follow-up, I asked the women what has helped them in the career preparations. The various answers correlated to the earlier findings of factors that supported persistence and the conclusions of Quimby &
O’Brien (2004). Social support systems and a high level of positive self-efficacy related to career preparations were evident with this group of participants. Faculty, both through personal interactions and integrating job shadowing, career services personnel and internships into course content introduced more than half of the participants to career options. As Barbara fondly recalled, “[For class we] went out to the classrooms for observations. That was a fantastic experience…The professor, she was fantastic…her energy was fantastic and she relayed that to us as students. So we were excited to get out into the classroom.” Pamela also attributed her career direction as connected to a professor and exclaimed, “it is really the professors here that have helped me figure out where I am going. I knew the general direction and they helped me pinpoint it.” In addition to the support of faculty, the network of family, friends and agencies dedicated to employment through education appeared to be integral to their future careers. Participants job shadowed parents, discussed options with friends and classmates and engaged in job placement opportunities.

Strong self-efficacy or confidence in personal ability to accomplish career goals presented itself as a theme for more than a few of the participants. As Arlene explained:

Every time I have to get up at 3:00 am [for a factory based job], that gives me the strength to come to school…I do not want to do that for the rest of my life. That helps me come here to finish my degree and do something I really like.

Similarly, Joan proclaimed, “I am a unique person. I am very strong willed…If I want something, I am going to get it done.” The findings related to perceptions of formal career services at the community college and informal preparations through support networks and self-drive are important to understand given the economic and job market nuances. Many of the participants were concerned about the availability of employment opportunities, but did not make the connection to career services support for a variety of reasons. This disconnect was
alarming given the trends concluded by Geiger and Heller (2011), in that the community college tuition has risen, state and federal financial aid decreasing and family incomes flattening. My presumption was similar to Johnson’s (2010) findings that professional advancement was the driving force behind persistence and that consequently, career services would be highly salient to the experiences of the participants. However, this was not a finding through the data gathered. One explanation could be a lack of adult-student specific outreach and communication by the career support offices.

**Adult Learner Voice and Recommendations**

Gaining the perspective and honoring the perceptions of participants living the experience was not only a tenet of the constructivist paradigm under which I conceptualized this study, but also in my opinion was the most effective way to inform practice. Substantiating the need for suggested improvements directly from the participants was the finding that overall, through the responses to the interview questions and pre-interview questionnaire it was apparent that adults that were highly non-traditional according to the NCES characteristics did experience a greater level of challenge to persistence. This was strikingly evident in the total amount of semesters each group spent obtaining their degree. The moderately non-traditional women took between four and six semesters, while the highly non-traditional students ranged between 6 and 16 or more. Given this finding, that supports the empirical work of Choy (2002) and the NCES, attention is warranted by the institution specific to the persistence needs of adult women learners.

During the interviews, I asked the participants for advice they would relay to new female adult learners and ways in which the community college could support their persistence and career preparation. There were many interesting findings and suggestions to base recommendations for
practice. Overall, the women were thoughtful, creative and excited to share their ideas for improvement. Pertaining to balancing family and student responsibilities, Janet reasoned:

> I think that, especially for adult women, there should be more incorporation of the family and of work [in orientation]. I know younger kids have orientation to try to get them familiar with college and how to handle college…but the adult learners get lost, because they do not need that kind of education. They need…support to deal with the family and the profession. I do not think the adult learner gets that kind of help.

This idea aligns with research and findings of this study, in that family is an important piece of the college attendance puzzle for these women. Family members could gain a greater sense of empathy for the adult learner and therefore more fully assist in creating a family-student balance for the women in this study. Additionally, Janet identified a feeling many women may experience in navigating a balanced life when she worried:

> It is nice to talk to your husband or wife, but if they are not struggling with the day-to-day and going to school, I do not know if they could actually understand what you are going through and provide appropriate comfort or help.

While other participants may not have expressed this exact sentiment, the benefits of family members increasing their understanding of attending college as an adult would be far-reaching and alleviate stressors on persistence.

One of the most thought provoking findings and one not expressed in the literature was that most of the women felt a strong desire to assist their peers and bolster the confidence of new students. Lauren responded with equal parts enthusiasm and seriousness with, “you [adult female learner] deserve to be here and you can do this…you are important and do not ever lose sight of you.” Their genuine concern for ensuring the success of other adult women learners was enlightening and unexpected. Correspondingly, many of the participants wanted future adult women learners at the community college to self-advocate for needs, prioritize persistence, develop strong time management skills and embrace education regardless of age. As Joan
articulated, “Be yourself. Be strong. Do not give up. Ask questions. Be determined. Be your own voice. Stand up for you. Those are all things I have learned coming back to school as an adult older learner.” In addition, a few participants wanted to remind adult students that any challenges were temporary. Lauren followed her earlier encouragement with:

You [adult female learner] deserve it, you deserve to be here and you are going to love this. If you do it to better yourself there is no negative at all and through the stress and anxiety, it is temporary. It is temporary and when you are finished, it is going to be such a great sense of accomplishment.

Connections between adult women learners at the community college and likewise assisting new adult students adjust to college expectation was something many of the participants valued. To formalize this ethic of care into a persistence-friendly opportunity at the community college, Janet suggested a support group for adult students, stating, “a support group [for] adult learners who want to talk to someone…for someone to tell you “what you are feeling is normal and this is how people feel.” Then you don’t have to feel like you are failing or alone.” The peer relationship foundation would also help build the confidence of new students more quickly and a way for current students exercise skills learned in communication and leadership.

A few participants expressed that components of the community college are important to utilize for success and that it is a good place to start the educational journey. Only one participant was an outlier and advised that adult women learners attend a different college. This question of the protocol elicited the most impassioned responses from the participants, rich with perceptions of their experience as a whole and embodied an ethic of care. Much like the other findings, the information gleaned will inform recommendations for future support structures of adult women learners.

The other future-thinking questions asked for their thoughts on how the community college could assist them to overcome challenges to persistence and how to change career
support services to better align with their needs. Suggested improvements to career services from the participants included increased communication and advertising of services, opportunities to meet with more major specific professionals and present relevant information in the classroom. Lauren offered, “I think it would be important in any degree or certificate…the instructor lets them know or at least talks about it [career services]…Even somehow it is required that the career center is talked about in a class.” The information gathered from responses, others from less direct questions and context information from the “gatekeeper” at the community college formed the framework for the following recommendations. These recommendations offer options grounded in theory, best practices and the day-to-day experiences of those affected by institutional structure, decision-making rationale and campus culture in the hope of ensuring persistence and the promises of community college education.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Bristol Community College should adopt persistence-friendly techniques that are appropriate for the adult women learner

The eleven participants in the study described various challenges and supportive factors that affected their ability to persist to graduation. Generally, the participants crave accurate and timely information related to their academic and social experiences at the community college. The focus on efficiency and effectiveness of their experience correlates to the perceived amount of time and energy they then have for their familial and occupational responsibilities, which is tremendously important to them. Additionally, these women viewed themselves as motivated and high self-sufficient to accomplish their goals.

The community college should formalize a number of specific strategies to signal new and current adult students that they have unique needs. The first recommendation for the
community college is to incorporate detailed pages with important information for adult learners on the website. Creating a dynamic and information rich section of the college website particularly for this group of students would address issues of expressed frustration with limited communication and lack of in-depth information on topics important to their re-enrollment. Communicating information and updates in an easily accessible and convenient manner is crucial to success. From the interviews, adult women learners are interested in information pertaining to academic advising, transfer pathways, aligning their academic endeavors with career options, time management skills, internships, childcare, scholarships and general contact list of available resources to students on campus. While a set of adult student specific webpages would reach a vast number of students at the community college, administrators must consider the level of computer literacy of this population during implementation. However, the benefits of cost-efficiency and amount of students served through this idea would make this feasible for the community college.

Monroe Community College (n.d.) has a comprehensive set of webpages for their adult students, operated by the Office of Adult and Experiential Learning. Beginning with positive and welcoming messages for adult students, the website offers information on gaining credit for previous courses taken and life experiences, online career coaching, alternative course completion options including summer, distance and off-campus, access to a national publication of the Adult Learner Guide and contact information. More specifically, given the discrepancies of information given during academic advising that the participants cited as a barrier to persistence, the community college could use the format of Oakton Community College’s Advising and Counseling webpage. On this page, Oakton Community College dedicates a subpage to adult students and highlights the understanding that this population often faces a
“frenetic schedule” (Oakton Community College, n.d.). Information begins with placement tests, introduces key terms like semester hour and prerequisite, transfer programs, career programs, tips for balancing college and life and links for registration and payment. There are even links for purchasing textbooks, student support services throughout campus and interestingly a link that encourages feedback on the webpage (Oakton Community College, n.d.).

The community college could combine both models of Monroe Community College and Oakton Community College as a foundation and include additional information. A webpage or webpages for adult learners should be focused on concise, relevant and thorough information that will benefit both on-campus and on-line learners. In addition to content including course completion options, academic advising, tips for success, links to campus support services, transfer options, there could be details on Financial Aid and scholarships, the Co-Op Internship program, library resources, tutoring options, on-campus employment, childcare options and updated contact information for faculty and staff. Another important aspect of a proposed webpage would be student success stories, highlighting the positive impact college attendance has had on individuals. The adult students in this study were eager to share their story, lessons learned and words of encouragement to current and future students. Capitalizing on this attitude would be of benefit to the community college as they seek to engage the adult student population. Centralizing and communicating information was a common recommendation for improvement made by the participants. A web-based approach may serve as a starting point to not only provide information to current and future adult learners, but also to recognize their unique and important perspective that enriches the campus culture.

A second persistence-friendly technique the community college should adopt is to expand their on-campus childcare options. Many of the women in this study not only expressed securing
dependable childcare as a struggle in establishing the family-student balance but also suggested that more childcare opportunities at the community college would be helpful to them. A few of the participants described having to bring their children to class on more than one occasion during their tenure as a student. During a conversation with an administrator at Bristol Community College, I learned that the institution does offer some childcare on the main campus, only during the day and by registration only (S. M. Buglione, personal communication, April 3, 2014). However, many of the women in this study and presumably others attend courses during the evening and/or on one of the three satellite campuses. Before expanding their services, it would be beneficial for the community college to survey the adult students and determine the exact scope of need, particularly during what times of day or on which campuses. The infrastructure exists for childcare at the community college, so a recommendation would be to assess the service and make appropriate changes to meet the need. A drop-in option would also ensure that adult students could attend classes and other obligations in the case their prior care service was unavailable. If expansion of services proves cost-prohibitive, communicating alternative options near each of the campuses would provide some support and increase the ability to persist for adult women.

**Recommendation 2: The community college should offer orientation programming relevant to the needs of adult students**

Consistent with the concerns of balancing multiple responsibilities including family, college and employment, one of the participants suggested incorporating family and spouses into the orientation offered by the community college. This idea, proposed by participant Janet, intrigued me and after ruminating on other data gained through interviews, it is clear that family and children are supportive of college attendance, but that enveloping them in the process would
have many benefits. From my understanding, Bristol Community College provides new student orientation twice yearly as well as a version of a virtual orientation. As the infrastructure is in place for orientation, minor adjustments could be made to offer not only sessions that incorporate the family unit, but also provide specific adult student information on services offered, unique transitions and developing pathways for success while managing external responsibilities. Additionally, a support community through utilizing current adult learners as presenters or peer leaders could be established and built upon. I base one recommendation on the orientation content from Blue Ridge Community College, where they offer a Faculty/Adult Student Panel specific for students older than 24 years. Additionally, they offer the standard parent session for with information related to supporting their child through the adjustment period (Blue Ridge Community College, n.d.). Bristol Community College should create a similarly themed session for spouses, parents and children of the adult learner. I would suggest the adult learner be present at this session to further strengthen the family unit and alleviate any disconnect between perceptions of college attendance. While other participants did not vocalize this exact sentiment, a vast majority described the stress of the balancing act and addressing this challenge to persistence could increase individual confidence, signal to all involved in an adult learner attending college that they are valued and understood and increase retention.

**Recommendation 3: The community college should create a centralized support service office dedicated to adult learners.**

Building upon the notion of a specific webpage and orientation programming, centralization of services and information was a suggestion by many of the women in this study after describing experiences with getting the run-around from campus offices, receiving misinformation and sensing a lack of communication between offices and departments. Lauren
described, “divisions and departments in different buildings and get into a mode of only working with your own department, but there is a whole need for the community to engage. Communication is key.” Mary Beth corroborated, “I wish communication between departments was a little bit better. I found that I had to take multiple steps to the results I needed or to get things done.” Sara offered, “It has been a fine school…I think though they should be more proactive in letting students know what is available.” A solution a few participants offered was a one-stop location where professional staff could answer questions regarding financial aid, course questions, offer in depth career support, provide advocacy on behalf of the adult learners and provide a place where the individual adult student could feel understood. At this specific community college, establishing an office or hiring a Coordinator of Adult Support Services could enrich the experiences of adult students and provide them with various services to encourage persistence. Frederick Community College’s Office of Adult Services strives to understand the adult student and in particular women on their campus. They provide a holistic approach to those they serve, with offering career and academic counseling, scholarship information, a Women’s Center, and partnerships with community agencies focused on housing and single parent support (Frederick Community College, n.d.). The incorporation of family and employment needs into the services for adult students would help decreased the stress of balancing responsibilities on individual persistence that was of great concern to the participants in this study. Although many students expressed a strong self-motivation to succeed, Bristol Community College should proceed with offering a specific support office or person dedicated to adult students.

When I asked a participant if they believed adult students would utilize a centralized service system, she replied, “I think if they [adult students] knew about it, it was central and we
could do all sorts of things, then yes.” From a central support office, the staff of trained professionals can create and foster other persistence-friendly options. The overarching mission should be to advocate on behalf of the adult learner needs within the community college, be a source of credible information for the students and maintain a safe space for the discussion of challenges to persistence, both internal and external to the institution.

**Recommendation 4: The community college should formalize a support or affinity group for adult women learners.**

As cited in the literature and findings of this study, adult women learners at the community college have high levels of self-efficacy in relation to their coursework, career plans and overall ability to maintain progress towards degree attainment. Accordingly, they rely on support systems for fortitude and view connections to other adult learners as a highly positive part of their educational journey. Both emotional and academic support were benefits of these peer relationships according to participants in this study. Most often, the women found commonalities amongst each other while attending classes or while accessing services like tutoring. Creating a support or affinity group for adult women learners would serve multiple purposes. First, it would allow for those women who want to help other students succeed the opportunity to build their leadership, communication and interpersonal skills by acting as mentors to new members. Secondly, those students that are struggling to create the family-student balance, transition into college level coursework, unsure of available services or lacking self-confidence to succeed could have a place full of support, empathy, positivity and the learned experience of others to build strategies for persistence.

Lastly, this group could be a rich and central source of information for the institution to consult when making policies and procedures. In a recent conversation with the administrator at
Bristol Community College, a similar idea was mentioned when describing outcomes from a newly formed group of administrators focused on the success of the adult student population (S. M. Buglione, personal communication, April 3rd, 2014). This group wondered whether an affinity group would benefit the students and given the sentiments of many study participants the answer is yes and the community college should consider plans for implementation a priority. A collective and often unheard voice could be established and promoted through either establishing a student club or a group created by an office such as counseling services or if established, the Center for Adult Student Services. If it were a club, a professional staff member from counseling or similar office should hold the adviser role to ensure connection to the greater college community. Although limited information is published on their website, Westchester Community College (n.d.) has a social group for adult students called the Student Forum and is described in a Frequently Asked Questions section as:

In addition to the almost 70 student clubs on campus, the Student Forum is a social organization for part-time and adult students, sponsoring trips, special Meet and Munch evenings and a variety of other activities for you to meet other adult students. College is not all work!

A student run club at the community college should consist or social, academic and network building programs and activities. They could also sponsor workshops and have representatives from campus support service offices speak to their group over lunch about topics of financial aid, scholarships, transfer options, counseling, careers and more. Additionally, adult women learners would also benefit from general socializing and talking through their success and challenges with similar students. Bristol Community College should incorporate members of the group into orientation and open house programming to introduce new students to the opportunities of joining the group. To accommodate online adult women learners, an on-campus member could be paired with an online student to communicate regularly with via in an agreed
upon method, such as phone or email. Piloted at the main campus by students, this group could create guidelines and intentions and then replicate the group on the other three campuses if the student interest was evident.

Alternatively, the group could rotate between the campuses when holding meetings, programming or events. The introduction of a support or affinity group would enrich the lives of the adult women learners and the campus culture. This idea appears to be important to both the students in this study and the administration at the community college. The next steps would be to identify a few students who would like to formalize the group and an adviser willing to create an initial support structure for start-up. Hosting an introductory meeting to gauge interest and determine content for future meetings should build on the foundation created by the initial students. This group may also prove to be the most cost efficient method to addressing challenges to persistence for this group of students.

**Recommendation 5: the community college should adopt standardization tools for their academic advisers**

Through the information knitted together from participants, it was clear that their academic interactions were most important to their experience with the community college. The adult women learners valued the education they earned, for both the content and prospect at a better career upon graduation. They took their education seriously, viewed faculty as supporting their persistence and expressed frustration when their academic progress was impeded by negative interactions with academic advising or transfer services. This disconnect appears to be based on personalization and communication efforts. Positive interactions with academic advising, whether faculty or professional staff centered on expressing care for the student as an individual and having the knowledge to minimize taking unnecessary courses.
Currently, Bristol community college assigns students to an adviser based on their declared academic major. If a student is undeclared or general studies, administrators match them with a professional staff adviser or random faculty member. Other infrastructural aspects include a requirement for students to meet with an adviser until they have earned 45 credits and drop-in advising options. This structure is common among the satellite campuses. The stress caused during negative experiences with academic advising was a barrier to persistence for many of the women. Some turned from the formal services of the college to utilizing friends, self or faculty for advice on course selection. After discussing this trend with the Bristol Community College administrator, it was clear that the college wants to curtail this drift (S. M. Buglione, personal communication, April 3, 2014). This study was timely, as academic advising at the institution is gearing up for key changes to the both the philosophy and delivery of advising services. A recent change in leadership has propelled many of these improvements, which have included implementing a degree auditing software called DegreeWorks, mandating that first year students attend workshops related to advising and formulating a grant funded pilot program for 60 undeclared students, focused on a “guided pathway to success.” This pilot program will include adult learners paired with a professional adviser that will act more similar to a case manager. The proposal is such that the adviser transcends mere course registration but invests energy and time building a relationship with each student. Understanding their backgrounds, life circumstances, career interests and personal well-being are hallmarks of this proposal. This is close to holistic advising, which is a method The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) recommends (Gordon, Habley & Grites, 2008). Building upon a holistic foundation, incorporating a strengths-based mentality in advisers would prove beneficial. Focusing on an individual’s strengths instead of their deficiencies throughout the advising process allows for
understanding the student more deeply and “what got them this far, what they enjoy, [and] what they believe they can do well…[advising then] focuses on possibilities, rather than problems” (Gordon et al., 2008, p. 23). I also strongly believe, given the challenges the participants faced, that adopting a holistic and strengths focused delivery system of academic advising would increase student utilization of services, limit the amount of misadvising and alleviate the stress on persistence the current structure creates for adult women learners. The community college should continue the path of improvement they are currently undertaking and build in assessment tools. In addition to the positive changes and general shift in attitude, there can be other actions taken to not only ensure success of incoming students but also mitigate the ongoing challenges as expressed by the participants.

Based on the participant’s interest in relationship building and need for accurate information the community college should incorporate two academic advising tools. The first would be requiring advisers to create their own personal advising mission or philosophy statements. A personal advising philosophy statement generally consists of five to eight general academic advising principles that the individual believes creates successful environments under which advising occurs. NACADA provides a plethora of easily accessible information, grounded in research, on best practices, ethics, advising techniques for specific populations, including the adult learner, legal underpinnings and more (Gordon et al., 2008). Utilizing the frameworks and mission of the specific advising center, each adviser should write their statement and subsequently offer it to prospective advisees. Similar to the webpages of Aims Community College (n.d.) and the University at Albany (n.d.), the community college should post the statements, contact information, office hours and if possible picture of their advisers on the website. Strikingly, the University at Albany (n.d.) includes concise educational background and
specific advisee type information in each adviser profile. Providing personal advising philosophy statements to advisees online or in another form will better help adult women learners especially, connect to their adviser and understand their role as a supporter along the educational path.

Additionally, the statement would clarify purpose intentions and actions of each of the staff and create a more collaborative environment based on student success. These statements should also account for the wider mission of the department and community college. Once this is established, the advising office could easily assessment of the individual adviser and accountability grounded in more than opinion or mere observation (Gordon et al., 2008).

Instituting this tool would increase the dedication and thoughtfulness by advisers to a student-centered, holistic advising model and best serve the community college population as a whole.

A second tool that Bristol Community College should create is a syllabus for academic advising. This relatively new instrument in the field of advising focuses on learned knowledge of successful advising techniques and the familiarity of students with the purpose of a syllabus because of the classroom exposure. According to NACADA a non-academic advising syllabus should at the very least communicate the expectations and responsibilities of the student and those of the adviser. More defined, Tonya McKenna Trabant’s (n.d.) article entitled “Advising Syllabus 101” written for NACADA outlines eight recommended components to structure an effective syllabus. These include accounting for the nuances of the specific college, formatting the document to adhere to the academic syllabus guidelines of the individual college, a definition of an adviser and/or advising and current contact information for the adviser and/or office. Additional pieces should include the responsibilities of the student, the responsibilities of the adviser, expected outcomes of the advising process and lists of resources, recommendations and calendar events important to the student overall experience (Trabant, n.d.).
Implementing an advising syllabus common to all advisers at the community college would serve many purposes and mitigate the challenges of unclear communication, a perceived unfriendly office environment and vague relationships between the adult women learners and the advisers. For examples of advising syllabi, please reference appendices C and D. These documents are from University of Massachusetts at Boston and Northeastern University respectively. Combining elements from these syllabi, the Bristol Community College document should include goals, advising mission and purpose statement, advisee responsibilities, adviser responsibilities, contact information, a calendar section and the systematic process of class registration. I believe defining the expectations and outlining the responsibilities of both the student and the adviser would be the most beneficial component of the syllabus for the students at Bristol Community College. The advising staff should introduced the syllabus at orientation and reinforce the importance of the document during the first advisee-adviser meeting. It should also be a central aspect of training for new advisers, evaluated for efficiency and effectiveness and align with the Degree-Works instructional workshops. The adult women learners are in need of clear information that creates a path to success and establishing trust in support services like advising in order to not only persist but also have an enriching educational experience.

**Recommendation 6:** The community college should create an award for outstanding faculty members.

Indisputably, the adult women learners in this study expressed their satisfaction with the faculty at Bristol Community College. Most of the participants perceived faculty members as incredibly helpful in overall persistence but it went deeper, as gathered from the participant responses. The women were inspired to enroll, pursue new avenues of interest with confidence, felt understood, found mentors in professors and experienced environments that allowed them to
more easily create the family-student and frequently work balance. Concluded from their 
collective comments, these women had a love of learning and the faculty created the safe space 
and route to explore and grow.

The college at large should recognize the positive affect the faculty have had on the 
experiences of these participants and presumably others. Creating a faculty award or recognition 
system would highlight the positive relationships, provide role models for newly hired faculty 
and incentivize the full time and adjunct faculty. Students of the community college should 
nominate potential faculty recipients based on a combination of academic and non-academic 
support. A committee of administrators, faculty, staff and students should review nominees with 
a pre-determined rubric that contains aspects from contributions to the field of expertise, service 
to the community college and most importantly demonstrated support of individual student care. 
There could be an award winner per division, one from each campus or one overall winner. The 
community college could announce the winners to the public at large through the campus 
newspaper and local media outlets. Recognizing and then promoting the successes of faculty at 
the community college will create a campus and wider community culture that values excellence 
in service to students. Central Virginia Community College’s (n.d.) Outstanding Faculty Award 
offers a comprehensive model and clearly describes the program on their website. Information 
includes the selection committee and process, as well as criteria and a link for nominations. This 
community college presents the award at graduation and accompanied by a plaque and $500 
check (Central Virginia Community College, n.d.).

Bristol Community College should use elements of this model including the nomination 
and selection processes and cash endowment, but I think the community college should present 
the award or awards at an event such as a recognition dinner. At this event, all or the top ten
percent of nominees could be present, as well as the students who submitted their names and other prominent members of the community college. Students should have the opportunity to speak at this event about their nominee and offer personal examples of the positive impact the faculty have made on their experience and success as an individual. Given that many of the participants spoke passionately about faculty members, the community college should capitalize on this and begin with adult women learners nominating candidates as the program establishes. The creation of a student-driven awards system for faculty will foster a campus culture that values excellence in not only knowledge, but also of relationships and service to individual student success.

**Recommendation 7: The community college should create a task force to evaluate and assess the support services related to career preparations.**

A final recommendation for Bristol Community College based on the interviews of the eleven adult women learners in this study relates to services supporting career preparations. The overwhelming majority of participants had not used the support offered at the Career Services office at either of the campuses represented in this sample of students. While there could be creative solutions to the apparent lack of outreach on behalf of the office or how to better tailor the services to adults who have had work and life experiences before entering the community college, I recommend a more basic proposal. The community college should develop a task force to assess the current structure and operation of Career Services and gain further data from students as to their needs and perceptions. Conducting focus groups comprised of a wide variety of student types or developing a survey tool will provide the needed information to restructure the delivery methodology. Similar to the Bristol Community College group formed to address the academic advising shortcomings, this task force would be the driving force behind innovative
change. Utilizing Wild and Ebbers’s (2002) recommendations for a retention task force, the career services group should strive to accomplish a framework to build upon. Important to include in the framework are defining career services in relation to the community college, determine goals and learning outcomes to institute, collect data from students, including adult learners, and review current best practices through published literature and attending conferences related to career services at higher education institutions. After establishing this broad framework and understanding the scope of need, the administrators should establish a strategic plan, begin implementation and build in frequent assessment methods (Wild & Ebbers, 2002).

Career services is an integral aspect of the collegiate experience for all students, but in particular adult women learners, because of their familial responsibilities and the status of the nationwide job market. The community college should prioritize addressing the lack of utilization of career services for the benefit the students and all those connected to them to ensure the most successful future possible.

**Conclusion**

Adults pursuing a post-secondary degree at community colleges are a population of students with unique backgrounds, rich life experiences, challenged by barriers both in and out of the classroom, passionate about learning and striving for the better life a college degree often promises (Kasworm, 2003). Currently, over 60% of community college students are 22 years or older and experts project these numbers to increase (2013 Community College Fast Facts, 2013). The composition of college campuses will diversify because of this trend and responding with retention efforts based on traditional aged student knowledge, will be a disservice to ideals of higher education. To ensure the sustainability of higher education, professionals can no longer overlook the distinct needs of adult students. Adult women, who chose to study at a community
college, are an increasing demographic who enrich the campus community with their presence and interactions with traditional aged students. As the population will undoubtedly grow, given the changing job market, federal fiscal support for job training programs, open access mission of community colleges and a personal love of learning, it is critical for institutions to understand their needs and respond accordingly. The purpose of this study was not only to investigate the factors that support and hinder persistence of adult women learners from their perspectives, but also contribute to the limited body of published work on this subject. The wider higher education community possesses limited empirical knowledge about the collegiate experiences and perceptions of this population, yet the growth in enrollment calls for attention. Researchers such as Bean and Metzner (1985), Dayton (2005), Capps (2012), Cox and Ebbers (2010) and others have found that adult students face challenges to persistence in a dissimilar way than their traditional aged counterparts. Adult learners, and women in particular, have to physically, emotionally and mentally navigate a balance between their responsibilities to family, work, friends and self, all while pursuing a post-secondary degree.

Grounded in literature, research studies, and observations made by practitioners in the field, I constructed a qualitative interview-based project to better understand the lived experiences of adult women learners at a community college. Bristol Community College, located in southern Massachusetts hosted this project through Dr. Buglione, Dean of the Lash Center for Teaching and Learning. Eleven adult women learners participated in interviews, and the information-rich answers regarding persistence factors, the role of the community college and career related support services, informed important findings and recommendations for improved practice.
Findings from the collective responses were diverse, interesting and at times supported existing literature and at others paved new understandings of their experience. In general, the various participants faced barriers to their persistence that included lack of communication between offices and students at the community college, difficulty with establishing clear academic advising and a struggle in creating a balance between family, work and collegiate responsibilities. Others included being a caretaker for children or elder parents and maintaining a high level of self-advocacy through challenges. Although challenges were prevalent within this group, participants identified several support structures that bolstered their ability to persist. While friends and classmates helped, it was the faculty at Bristol Community College and family members that were most salient to their persistence. The adult women learners characterized these supporters as empathetic, encouraging, motivating and understanding of the external circumstances that affected their educational journey. A second trend emerged through the responses related to ensuring persistence. The self-confidence, motivation and belief in their abilities to succeed were incredibly strong among this group.

This ability to persevere based on inner strength for these women was also evident in the findings related to career services. Overwhelmingly, these women had not utilized the support services offered by the Career Services office whilst a student. Participants attributed this to both limited outreach from the office and a sentiment that support was unnecessary because they knew what they wanted in a career field.

Based on the literature, participant suggestions and my interpretation of the collective need, I recommended that the community college increase the clarity, specificity and overall amount of communication to adult students and initiate steps to meet the unique needs of this population. Proposed initiatives include that the community college should create a webpage
specific for adult learners, expand the childcare services to include an evening option, develop orientation programming for adult learners and their families, and establish a central support office for this population. Additional adult women learners would benefit immensely if Bristol Community College formalizes a student-run support group, institutes academic adviser profiles and an advising syllabus and creates a task force to address the office of Career Services in whole. Through implementing these recommendations, the ability to persist of adult learners, and in particular women, will elevate. Higher education institutions strive to increase retention and successful degree completion rates and through creating persistence-friendly techniques, tools and an environment on campus, Bristol Community College will experience heightened success rates and thereby ensure institutional sustainability.

To fully understand factors of persistence, future researchers should focus on topics such as, the adult male learner experience, the effect that traditional aged students have on adult learners, techniques to capitalize on the documented high self-efficacy levels, assessment tools for support services as they adjust to adult learner needs and so forth. The success of adult students in higher education positively affects their sphere of influence, including their spouses, friends, classmates, professors, coworkers, self and especially children. The future generation of students in our higher education institutions is currently witnessing the challenges and benefits of obtaining a post-secondary degree through the experiences of the college-going parents. Additionally, greater stability for the nationally economy will be secured if adult students entering college persist, graduate and re-enter the workforce with the enhanced skills and knowledge a post-secondary education provides. Therefore, it is imperative that institutions with an adult student population intentionally operate with a student success purview. Understanding
the needs for student success of adult women learners is the first step. As Arlene summed her experience as an adult learner at Bristol Community College, she reflected:

> It has been a long road. It has been hard, not easy. But I have said “you do not quit,” you do it. It is hard work, it is a sacrifice for you and for your family. But I believe it will pay off one day, that’s my hope, that is why I am here. I am studying hard. I wish sometimes I was able to spend more time with my family and kids, but like I tell them “this will be good for me and for you”…I think it was the best decision I made. I wish I had done it earlier in life, but it is never too late.

These women are investing, sacrificing, trusting and believing in higher education. We should meet these actions with equal vigor and be determined to create persistence-friendly pathways to success both at the institution and beyond graduation.
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Appendix A

Pre-interview questionnaire

*required questions

1. Name*: _______________________________
2. Are you 25 years or older?*  Yes  No
3. Gender*: ______________________________
4. Race: _______________________________
5. Email address*:____________________________________
6. Highest level of education received*: Some HS, GED, HS diploma, Associates degree, or Bachelor’s degree or higher
7. Academic Major/Program*: _______________________________
8. Total college credits earned:_______________________________
9. Total semesters at Bristol Community College*:_______________
10. Do you have children?*  Yes   No
11. Please mark all that apply to you*:
   __ Did not enter college directly after high school
   __ Attends college part-time
   __ Working full time (35 hours or more per week)
   __ Financially independent from parent or guardian
   __ Have dependents other than spouse (ex. Children)
   __ Single parent
   __ Have a GED
   __ Did not finish high school
12. What is your career aspiration/goal?* ________________________________
Appendix B

Protocol for Interview

1. What class or classes are you taking this semester?

2. How did you decide on Bristol Community College to pursue your degree?

3. Are you planning to seek a further degree or enter the career field upon graduation?

4. What challenges have you experienced to enrolling semester after semester?

5. What could the community college do to help you with these challenges?

6. Describe factors, people and/or things that have helped you on your path to graduation?

7. If you have children, how has being responsible for their care affected your college path?

8. What role have professionals here at Bristol Community College played in your ability to stay in college?

9. If you have used career services, how well does it support your needs?

10. What else has helped support your career preparations?

11. Suppose you are the president of Bristol Community College, what would be one change you would make to career services and why?

12. What would be your best piece of advice that you would pass on to a new female adult student at Bristol CC?

13. As a researcher, what else should I know about your experience that we have not covered today?
UMass Boston College of Liberal Arts
Declared Majors Advising Syllabus

Goals:
Student will know how to:

- Navigate the University: awareness of available resources and where to go for
different needs.
- Enroll in classes that lead toward degree completion.
- Complete degree requirements: major and general education.
- Connect with available resources to plan for discipline-related work, graduate
studies, internships, and career opportunities.

Student responsibilities:

- Identify your faculty advisor by consulting WISER or inquiring with the
department.
- Take the initiative to receive advising:
  - Check with your department to learn about advising dates and other
    relevant departmental events, if applicable.
  - Contact your advisor to schedule your advising appointment in advance of
    the registration date (October for spring registration and in March for fall
    registration).
  - Note: Most faculty advisors will not be on campus after classes end and
do not hold advising hours when classes are not in session.
- Review your course audit and next semester’s course offerings before the
advising appointment:
  - Bring a hard copy of your audit to the meeting (not all advisors will have
    printer access).
  - Review the course catalog and make a list of potential courses for next
    semester.
  - Come prepared with any additional questions you may have.
- During the semester, consult with your faculty advisor prior to making academic
decisions (pass/fail, withdrawal, repeat) in order to learn the policies and
understand the implications of those decisions.
- Be proactive: if you have other questions, need additional help, or are struggling
with classes (for academic reasons or otherwise), contact your faculty advisor for
help and/or ask her/him for an appropriate referral. If you are unable to reach
your faculty advisor, contact the department chair for guidance.

NOTE: It is the responsibility of the student to understand degree requirements, keep
track of his/her progress toward degree completion, know and meet deadlines, be aware
of his/her academic standing, declare intent to graduate before the deadline, and adhere
to University regulations.
Faculty Advisor Responsibilities:

- Provide opportunities for an advising meeting at least once per semester.
  - Additional meetings may be arranged by agreement.
  - If there is a scheduling conflict, the advisor should connect the student to another advisor or to the person who assigns departmental advisors.
- Respond to advisee emails in a timely manner. During absences from campus, the faculty advisor should leave an out-of-office reply message on her/his email with referral contact information for advisees.
- Provide opportunity to discuss the student's academic progress, goals, and concerns.
- During advising sessions, the faculty advisor will provide students with the opportunity to:
  - Review degree requirements: major and general education requirements, and appropriate timeline for completion.
  - Plan which courses/requirements to take the following semester.
  - Learn about opportunities in the major, internships, concentrations, tracks, etc., if applicable.
  - Learn about University resources that will aid in meeting the student's needs/goals.

Useful Links:

Writing Proficiency Requirement: www.umb.edu/wpe
Pass-fail Policy: http://www.umb.edu/registrar/academic_policies/course_pass_fall_option
Academic Policies: pass-fail, withdrawal from a class, withdrawal from the University, repeat policy and more: http://www.umb.edu/registrar/academic_policies
Elementary Language Proficiency:
http://www.umb.edu/academics/vpass/undergraduate_studies/policies/forms
Math Placement Information: http://www.umb.edu/testing (then select "Math")
Northeastern University
Internal Transfer Program – Advising Syllabus

Internal Transfer Program
Academic Advising Syllabus
Northeastern University

Advisors:  Susan M. Kolls (s.kolls@neu.edu)
Trish Drew (p.drew@neu.edu)
Office:  120 Hayden Hall
Phone:  617.373.5606
Email:  internaltransfer@neu.edu

Advising Office Hours:

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Materials:  Internal Transfer Orientation Packet
Personal Calendar – either paper or electronic (if electronic, please have a backup)

Academic Advising is an ongoing process that engages students in educational planning that is consistent with their academic strengths and personal and career goals. This student-centered advising process involves an active partnership among students, professional advisers and faculty advisers. Advisers provide guidance to students on academic matters and help students navigate the academic and organizational structure of the University. The academic advising process supports and promotes the development of students into lifelong learners and critical thinkers.

Academic advising involves:
- Working with students to promote their academic and professional development in light of their goals and aspirations
- Collaborating with students to develop courses of study consistent with curriculum requirements
• Supporting the development of students by allowing them to take responsibility for their actions and decisions
• Helping students to interpret academic policies and procedures
• Referring students to appropriate support resources
• Monitoring academic progress and encouraging good academic performance

Advisee Responsibilities –
What You Are Expected to Do
• Attend all required meetings for the Internal Transfer Program, including Orientation, advisor meetings and Information Sessions
• Read all ITP communications
• Come to meetings prepared
• Maintain a calendar of all required ITP meetings, class assignments, tests and exams
• Become knowledgeable about university policies and procedures
• Use your neu.edu email address for all ITP communications
• Regularly check your neu.edu email address for communication from the ITP
• Meet ITP application deadlines
• Decide on a 2nd choice major
• Ask questions if you do not understand the expectations of the ITP

Advisor Responsibilities –
What You can Expect from Us
As advisors we will strive to:
• Understand and communicate curricular, university and college policies and procedures
• Encourage and guide students as they define and develop realistic goals
• Encourage and direct students to gain the skills necessary to develop clear and attainable educational goals
• Assist students in understanding the purposes and goals of higher education, especially undergraduate education, and its effects on these goals
• Monitor student academic progress
• Be accessible for student meetings/questions via office hours, email and Blackboard
• Recommend qualified students to the appropriate admissions committee

ITP Meeting Information
First Required Meeting: The first required meeting will take place during regular walk-in hours from September 21-October 8. During this meeting you will have the
opportunity to update the ITP advisor on how your term is going, discuss your classes and instructors, and ask any questions that you might have.

Second Required Meeting: The second required meeting will take place during regular walk-in hours from November 2 – November 12. During this meeting you will complete the application for your desired program, discuss your Spring 2010 schedule, declare your 2nd choice major and will have the opportunity to ask any questions that might arise. No scheduling will take place during these required meetings. You are responsible for completing your own registration; however, please come to the meeting ready to discuss what you intend to take during the Spring term. If you have trouble registering for classes please email internaltransfer@neu.edu.

Third Required Meeting: (Not required for all ITP students – see contract for # of required meetings). The third required meeting will take place during regular walk-in hours from November 30 – December 10. During this meeting you will have an opportunity to update your ITP advisor on the conclusion of your ITP experience, ask questions about the next academic term and the application review process.

### Important Dates – Fall 2009

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<td>1st day of in-person I AM HERE, Labor Day</td>
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<td>Fall 2009 Classes Begin</td>
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<td>ITP Orientation, 221 Hayden Hall</td>
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<td>First Required ITP Advising Meetings (during walk-ins)</td>
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<td>Last day to file an exam conflict form for Fall classes</td>
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<td>Last day to drop a Fall class without a W grade</td>
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<td>Veterans' Day – No Classes</td>
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<td>ITP Application Deadline</td>
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<td>25-27</td>
<td>Thanksgiving Recess – No Classes</td>
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<td>Classes resume, First day of registration for SP10 classes</td>
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9       Last day of Fall classes
10      Reading Day
11-18   Final Exams
19      Final Exam makeup day (if needed)
21      Grade deadline at 2 PM
22      Grades available, ITP Review begins

Questions about the ITP? Your schedule? ITP requirements? Any concerns? Please email your ITP advisor or internaltransfer@neu.edu.

Have a great term!